

175 years of bird-spotting around Slingsby and Fryton

In 1845 the Revd. William Walker, the then Rector of Slingsby included bird life in his short but comprehensive account of Slingsby. In it he says that that rare birds are few. There is the **Crossbill** of which there are still rare sightings from time to time, and the **Bohemian Chatterer (Waxwing)**. The **Bittern** was apparently an occasional visitor and little to the east towards Hildenley the **Nightingale** could be heard for those who were fortunate. He does not list the more regular visitors.

Mr Walker also describes the ancient Slingsby Feast, still carried on in his time on Old Mayday in the 1840s. Garlands of flowers and birds eggs, (and we are not talking poultry here), were hung out around the village. Old May day came later in the month than we are used to, when the May blossom flowered. The highlight of the event '*was bounteous supplies of cheesecakes and tarts made of preserved fruits, enveloped in rich pastry*'. He describes this regular '*season of rural gaiety*' as continuing for two or three days. What they drank to keep all this going is not recorded!

In 1904 the Revd. Arthur St Clair Brooke in his book *Slingsby and Slingsby Castle* listed 103 species of bird that he had observed on his walks around the parish. As Rector of Slingsby and Fryton, he was also a knowledgeable naturalist and historian.

In 1996. Dr Michael Thompson, a retired GP, living in the village was, post retirement also a wildlife consultant monitoring endangered species. He identified 66 species (63%) from Mr Brooke's list, while on his walks.

Those birds seen by both Mr Brooke and Dr Thompson is as follows:

Heron	Mallard	Whooper swan
Merlin	Kestrel	Sparrow hawk
Pheasant	Grey Partridge	Moorhen
Golden Plover	Lapwing	Snipe
Curlew	Woodcock	Woodpigeon
Cuckoo	Tawny Owl	Barn Owl
Swift	Green woodpecker	Pied Wagtail
Greater spotted woodpecker	Skylark	House martin
Swallow	Duncock	Robin
Blackbird	Fieldfare	Redwing

Song thrush	Missal thrush	Garden warbler
Whitethroat	Lesser whitethroat	Chiffchaff
Willow warbler	Blackcap	Goldcrest
Spotted flycatcher	Long tailed tit	Coal tit
Great tit	Blue tit	Nuthatch
Tree creeper	Wren	Jay
Magpie	Rook	Carrion crow
Jackdaw	Starling	House sparrow
Tree sparrow	Brambling	Chaffinch
Linnet	Goldfinch	Greenfinch
Bullfinch	Crossbill	Redpoll
Corn bunting	Yellow hammer	Reed bunting.

In 1996 Dr Thompson also identified the following, not listed as seen in 1904:

Mute swan	Canada Goose	Buzzard
Red legged partridge	Coot	Oystercatcher
Black headed gull	Lesser black-back gull	Common gull
Collared dove	Little Owl	Kingfisher
Sand Martin	Grey Wagtail	Marsh tit
Siskin		

Over the last few years members of Slingsby Local History group have carried out their own surveys, usually at the time of the RSPB Garden Bird Watch which takes place on the last weekend of January. They have logged their findings on our Slingsby birdwatch email. Their sightings suggest that the common garden birds are all very active in the village, with good numbers of farmland birds like **tree sparrows** and **goldfinches** visiting bird tables .

There were a number of rarer birds that were on Mr Brookes original list that might still have been about in 1996 but were not identified. These included the **Yellow wagtail**, seen around about that time in fields on the Lawns. The **Pied flycatcher**, seen nesting fairly recently in the churchyard identified by Geoff Myers, a previous Slingsby Resident bird expert, now sadly missed. In his later years Geoff worked for the RSPB at their nature reserve at Saltholme near Middlesbrough. A **Sedge warbler** nested for a couple of years in a hedge above the field dykes on the Lawns when several small fields were left in an abandoned state for several years following the death of their owner.

This next section includes paragraphs from the Millennium History of Slingsby and its Wildlife. Michael Thompson gives some clues as to where various birds may be seen.

*'I am surprised that The Reverend Arthur Brooke did not see the mute swan flying over the parish, but he would not have seen the introduced **Canada Goose** that is now common having established itself in Yorkshire in the 1950s.*

***Heron** numbers like those of the **Kingfisher** fluctuate from year to year depending on the severity of the winter. Birds of prey are represented by the **Kestrel**, the **Sparrow hawk** and the occasional **Merlin** flying through from its moorland haunts.*

***Red legged partridges** introduced to the countryside in 1904 are now more common, and probably outweigh the **Grey partridge** in numbers around the fields at the edge of Slingsby village. **Moorhens** have successfully bred along the edges of Wath Beck but the **Coot** can only be seen on the marl-pit lakes that were restored at Brickyard farm to the north of the village. The coastal **Oystercatcher** has been recorded in the parish and has become a successful inland nesting bird. **Lapwing** numbers have declined considerably both nationally and locally due to changing farming practices but still one or two raise a brood in spite of harassment from **Carrion crows**.*

*Each year in spring large flocks of **Golden Plover** gather on the fields north of the disused railway track in their way north to their breeding grounds. Waders such as the **Snipe** and **Curlew** are not as abundant as previously as the land has been drained and become drier. **Gulls** following the plough are a relatively recent phenomenon, and I am surprised they were not around in 1904, particularly the **Black Backed gull**, being as we are relatively near to the coast.*

***Collared doves** started to colonise Britain in the 1955 from the continent, reaching Yorkshire in 1959. They are now well established in Slingsby. The **Little Owl** is an introduced species which has gradually spread across the country and were not here in Mr Brooke's time, but there are now two or three pairs established in Slingsby. The **Barn Owl** which used to be a common species which has disappeared from many areas across the Vale of Pickering is still seen in and around Slingsby'.*

When this was written, Dr Thomson thought that **Buzzards** should have been more common but were persecuted. Since then they have become much more

common and have nested up in Slingsby woods and can be seen regularly, soaring on the thermal currents, easily identified by their distinctive mewing call. The **Curlew** which used to be heard frequently on the land to the north of The Lawns seems to have disappeared since the turn of the 21st century.

Lapwing numbers have declined even more than as described by Dr Thompson and are now very rare indeed, where once they were abundant in the 1980s.

Collared Doves are now very common, and the attractive **Stock Dove** can also be seen in small numbers and is appearing quite often in our reporters lists.

Drainage works and changing farming practices have brought about many changes in the type of bird commonly seen on the farmland to the north and east of the village. 20 species in Mr Brookes book would not have been seen in the village now and were not included in the 1996 list. Many of these are water birds such as the **Avocet**, **Slavonic Grebe** and **Water rail** would have inhabited the watery Carrs to the north east of the village. The Carrs were drained for agricultural improvement in the inter-war years.

1978 when we moved to the village, the **Nightjar** could be heard very regularly in the summer on the very boggy margins of the abandoned railway line.

Waxwings or Bohemian Natterers as they used to be called, have also been visitors to the Lawns feasting on the rowan berries in very cold winters.

Please keep looking for more to add to the lists of what can be seen in and around Slingsby and Fryton now. Please email your findings to Slingsbybirdwatch@gmail.com so we can add them to these lists.

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